



Book Review

***The Cucumber King of Kėdainai.* Wendell Mayo. Boulder, Colorado: Subito Press, 2013. Paperback, 110 pages. ISBN 978-09831150-6-9**

Wendell Mayo is an American writer who regularly writes fiction set in contemporary Lithuania or involving Lithuanian characters. *The Cucumber King of Kėdainai*, a collection of short stories, is his fourth book and his second set in Lithuania. Many of his stories explore the strange interstices of relationships between Americans and Lithuanians. To an American-Lithuanian accustomed to reading very questionable, uninformed portraits of Lithuanians in contemporary American fiction (and sometimes, unfortunately, nonfiction), it is truly refreshing to come across an American who paints such an intimate, thoughtful, imaginative, and sometimes riotously funny portrait of modern Lithuania. The combination of his skill at prose and his wild imagination make for a refreshingly different vantage point, one that I think is just as accessible to American readers as it would be to Lithuanians - well, those in possession of the ability to laugh at themselves.

Take, for example, the title story, "The Cucumber King of Kėdainai," which involves two Americans going to visit a mafioso (of sorts) who has made a fortune in pickles. The premise is hilarious; the tone nearly gothic; the ending existential. You can't help enjoying the exuberance of the description of the limousine trip to the Cucumber King's wonderfully tasteless castle: "We began to penetrate a forest of hollyhocks, bled of most color by the pale third-moon. Blossoms studded monstrous stalks, pressed urgently against the glass" (p. 3), or the nutty way the narrator's love breaks into operatic arias, or the strange arrangement of rooms in the King's castle.

"Brezhnev's Eyebrows" takes another tack, this time dealing with a struggling painter whose love for his wife Asta, who is leaving him, is inexplicably tied to Brezhnev's bristling eyebrows. As a metaphor, the story deals with the entire spectrum of feelings regarding the former reign of the Soviets and the "benefits" brought by independence. The painter's masterpiece is ignored, while an American tourist pays him an outrageous sum for a tacky portrait of Brezhnev. With the money, he purchases a huge sack of fruit, hoping it will win back his wife. He finds it "hard for him to imagine that so many varieties of fruit had come so far to his country," (p. 39) but his wife rejects the starfruit, and he himself finds it "only slightly sugary, relatively tasteless." (p. 44) He realizes that in this new world he could easily make a good living selling portraits of Brezhnev rather than struggling to capture the blue-pink light he loves.

Conflicted feelings about the new times become a theme as well in "Goda," which takes the form of a woman's replies to an interrogation by police searching for a missing American. Here the humor lies in her manner, a mixture of defiance, such as "Could any of you nouveau cops swear that Lenin walked on two legs?" (p. 63) and weirdly colorful ways of expressing herself: "I swear my flat was so quiet that I could hear the dead in Antakalnis Cemetery snoring." (p. 65) And then there's the very premise that she could describe such intimate details about a person she has never laid eyes on. We've all run into people like this - of all nationalities - and it's a pleasure every time.

But this isn't to say that Mayo's writing is all fun and games. There's a deep sympathy here, but at the same time, a vivid awareness of the gulf between the cultures. Like the best writers, Mayo knows not just how to say it, but what to leave unsaid. A good example of this is the story "Cold Fried Pike," which mixes horror, humor, and sadness in equal parts. The characters in the story are unnamed, labeled only by their family roles ("The Mother," "The Daughter"), giving them distance, almost an iconic quality. "The American," on a quest to find out more about his family history, listens to the Grandmother's horrific narration of her experiences during the war, while the cold fried pike and a spoon "irretrievably lost" in The American's bowl of borscht take on the comedic role. When he wanders out into the grim landscape of modern Vilnius and finds himself senselessly arousing a pack of fenced-in dogs by banging a stick against the metal fence, Mayo lets us feel that gulf too:

He pressed his hands to his red cap covering his ears but they rang so loudly he could think of nothing else but stopping the sound. He shuddered once and it started snowing, not a driven snow, but straight down, a windless, silent, heavy fall. (p. 100)

Mayo is able to present Lithuania in a way that contributes to our understanding of the specifics of the Lithuanian experience, without ignoring what is human in us all. Lithuania (and America) are lucky to have him.

